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E.O. 12958: DECL: TEN YEARS
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EC](#)
SUBJECT: CORREA'S TRUTH COMMISSION HUNTS EX-PRESIDENT
FEBRES CORDERO

Classified By: PolOff Erik Martini for reasons 1.4 (b&d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Correa created a "Truth Commission" on May 3 to investigate alleged human rights violations by the Leon Febres Cordero (PSC) administration during the 1980s. Most of the members of the Commission are victim family members and self described persecuted human rights activists from the period. At the ceremony and in subsequent press statements, the Correa administration denied seeking revenge against Leon Febres Cordero himself. While not likely to dig up any new or surprising information, the Commission will attempt to settle some old scores and repay a campaign promise to the left, while building on Correa's theme of ending impunity and perhaps accelerating the PSC's decline. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (U) In a palace ceremony on May 3, President Correa fulfilled a campaign promise by creating a Truth Commission to investigate 327 alleged cases of murder, torture and disappearances between the years of 1984 and 1988. The period corresponds to the Presidency of Social Christian Party (PSC) stalwart Leon Febres Cordero (LFC). During his Presidency, LFC conducted a tough and unrelenting campaign to eradicate the leftist insurgent group, Alfaro Vive Carajo (AVC), roughly translated as "Alfaro Lives, Dammit!" (Widely revered as a hero, Eloy Alfaro was a liberal revolutionary from the coastal province of Manabi, credited with overthrowing conservatives in Quito and instituting many popular reforms of government). The government campaign was ultimately successful; AVC de-mobilized and became a political movement with merely symbolic influence in 1991.

¶3. (U) At the ceremony, a victim's family member denounced the U.S. School of the Americas for directing a "dirty war." GOE spokesmen steered clear of such attacks on the USG. An emotional Minister of Government Gustavo Larrea recounted the various friends he lost during the period. In the 1980s, a very young Larrea headed the Marxist Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) and was said to have been followed and spied upon by LFC's government. Larrea's family was forced to flee Ecuador during the military dictatorships of the 1970s, as his father was in the government of President Velasco Ibarra, who was overthrown by the military in 1972. An equally emotional Correa said the Commission was intended to heal and find justice, not look for revenge. In his radio address on May 5, Correa struck a similarly magnanimous tone: when a questioner pointed out that everyone knows who

murdered Consuelo Benavides and demanded the arrest of the former GOE military intelligence official allegedly responsible, Correa responded that the Commission would carry out its investigation and then make recommendations.

¶4. (U) The Commission will investigate cases for a period of six months, with a possible three month extension, presenting a report to legal authorities recommending prosecution. The GOE will help by declassifying documents and financing the effort. The Ecuadorian Constitution provides that there can be no statute of limitations for crimes of political killings, kidnappings or torture.

Commission Members Far From Impartial

¶5. (C) The Commission has several members: Monsignor Alberto Luna, former Bishop of Cuenca; Sister Elsie Monge, human rights activist; Julio Cesar Trujillo, jurist; Pedro Restrepo, Colombian father of two AVC members who disappeared in 1988; and, family members of AVC activists who also disappeared in the 1980s. Luna was an active critic of human rights violations in the LFC government during his time as Bishop of Cuenca. He claimed in 1987 that he was constantly followed by officers of LFC's Ministry of Government. EmbOfs at the time described him as from the liberal wing of the Catholic Church, although he came from an old and distinguished Quito family. Sister Elsie Monge was President of the Ecumenical Commission on Human Rights (CEDHU) during the 1980s, and also criticized LFC for human rights violations. CEDHU headquarters were raided in 1983; nothing was stolen and Sister Elsie claimed the government investigation was cursory and superficial, leading to no arrests. As a Maryknoll worker in Nicaragua, Sister Elsie strongly opposed the Somoza government, the U.S. support for it, and the U.S. opposition to the Sandinista regime. Several protests in front of the U.S. Embassy in Quito regarding Central America were licensed in her name during the 1980s.

Febres Cordero Speaks Out

¶6. (U) LFC broke weeks of public silence and responded to the creation of the Truth Commission on May 5, calling Correa authoritarian and totalitarian. Adding that Correa was a "demagogue following orders from Venezuela" Febres Cordero noted that, lamentably, there were some human rights violations during his administration. However, he claimed that the most egregious cases had already been investigated. He pointed out that the Ecuadorian Constitution prevents criminal investigations by any body other than the Public Ministry and that no person may be subjected to double jeopardy. Additionally, in the years 1989 and 1990, after his administration, CEDHU denounced 485 and 604 cases of human rights abuses, respectively, and he wondered why they were not part of the review. LFC pointed to the composition of the Commission and the time period it will investigate (1984-88) as proof that the whole endeavor is nothing but a political witch hunt against him. Correa, his press secretary, and members of the Commission subsequently denied

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that the Commission's work was focused on LFC and wondered rhetorically why LFC was so nervous.

¶7. (C) In a meeting with Guayaquil Consul General the day before the Commission's launch, LFC struck a combative tone. When the issue of the Commission came up, LFC switched from polite Spanish to expletive-laden English. LFC insisted that he had saved the country from communism and that his decisive leadership had spared Ecuador from the violent insurrections that have plagued its neighbors. Repeatedly calling Correa and Larrea communists and dictators, LFC insisted that they were obsessed with destroying him and freedom. LFC pledged that he would never flee into exile, but would fight Correa until the end.

Comment

18. (C) It will be difficult to dispel claims that the Commission is dedicated to revenge, especially as it appears to have been masterminded by Larrea and is made up of victims and human rights activists from the period. While the Correa government denies it, the Truth Commission is clearly aimed directly at Febres Cordero. After being a dominant political figure over the past twenty years, Febres Cordero is now a political dead horse. Febres Cordero also continues to suffer from health problems. LFC had a successful eye operation in Florida this winter, and he is recovering from a knee operation. He is supposed to return to Florida in June or July for another knee operation. Now out of politics himself, his party suffered a mass desertion in Los Rios province on May 4 and photogenic PSC presidential candidate Cynthia Viteri quit the party on April 17. Digging into Ecuador's turbulent past probably will not expose anything previously unknown, but will increase pressure on a beleaguered PSC and burnish Correa's justice credentials. There is also risk that charges of USG complicity in the abuses of the period will be dredged up as part of the findings.

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